

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

20 July 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: National Intelligence Estimates on the Soviet Role  
in the Middle East, 1965-1970

1. The heavy Soviet presence in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean is nowadays a fact of international life, accepted in a sense even by those powers most anxious to limit or contest it. This thought, among others, is conveyed in the long term (and gloomy) view of a recent National Intelligence Estimate:

"Moscow's assumption of a leading role in the area is a significant and probably durable accomplishment... Even in the event of another Arab-Israeli war and another defeat for major Soviet clients, the Soviets would almost certainly retain some sort of position in the area...and would continue to have a voice in the shaping of postwar configurations. With or without such a war, the political climate of the region is likely to remain generally turbulent. Radical nationalist forces will continue to work against Western interests and in their endeavors will no doubt continue to find Soviet support... In any case, the rivalry between the US and the USSR in the Mediterranean is likely to persist at least so long as the contest between them continues in the world at large."\*

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\* NIE 11-6-70, "Soviet Policies in the Middle East and Mediterranean Area," 5 March 1970, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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2. The present Soviet position in the Middle East has of course been long building. Its beginnings date back to 1955, when, as an NIE of 1956 put it, "A concurrence of developments ...combined to provide the USSR an opportunity to inject its influence forcefully into the Middle East", and when, in the words of the same estimate, the USSR, "by using the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Suez controversy", was able to "enhance its influence in the Arab world."\*

3. NIEs subsequent to 1956 followed roughly the same estimative path. A paper on Soviet foreign policy in May 1962 emphasized the disappointments Soviet policy had recently encountered in the Middle East and Africa and suggested that Moscow might be taking a more sober look at its prospects in underdeveloped areas. But it also concluded that radical changes in the Soviet approach were unlikely. An estimate issued in April 1963 called "The Soviet Role in the Arab World" repeated this theme and dealt extensively with Soviet setbacks in the area. Though the paper judged that the USSR "is unlikely to make any very substantial gains in the Arab

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\* Quotations in this paragraph are from NIE 11-4-56, "Soviet Capabilities and Probable Courses of Action through 1961," 2 August 1956, TOP SECRET

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world in the years immediately ahead," it also foresaw the continuation of the main lines of the Soviet effort in the Middle East. Moreover, while the USSR "is unlikely to encourage a showdown in the Arab-Israeli dispute in the near future... it will almost certainly attempt to disrupt a solution of this problem."

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4. Like Soviet policy itself, then, National Intelligence Estimates concerning the USSR's role in the Middle East have over the years maintained a certain consistency. Both the early papers cited above and those of more recent years have warned repeatedly of strong Soviet ambitions in the area and of the opportunities offered Moscow (principally by the radical Arabs) to satisfy these ambitions. They have, at the same time, cautioned that there are constraints on Soviet behavior in the Middle East, some essentially self-imposed, others the consequence of external pressures. Among the latter will be, as stated in an estimate of 1968, "the reluctance of the Arabs, who have freed themselves from the dominance of the West to accept any similar dominance by the Soviet Union."\*

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\* NIE 30-2-68, "The Eastern Arab World in the Aftermath of Defeat," 19 December 1968, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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5. Clearly there is still room for controversy about precisely what the Soviets had in mind even a decade ago, and it is impossible to define exactly what Soviet intentions are today -- concerning, say, the Israeli-UAR confrontation. Nevertheless, we think it safe to say, concerning principal judgments, that the estimative record has been good -- certainly not reassuring to our readers in terms of Soviet designs though not overly alarmist in terms of likely Soviet accomplishments.

6. If the papers can be said to have a single principal weakness, this might be their inability to foresee specific events of the kind which subsequently transform the attitudes and actions of the interested parties. We have in mind in particular the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, an event which could not have been predicted, at least not much in advance. We also have in mind military developments in the UAR-Israeli conflict during the winter of 1969-1970, particularly Israel's resort to deep-penetration air raids, which, we think, profoundly altered Egyptian views and apprehensions and, as a consequence of this, the nature of Soviet involvement. In general, concerning this question of Soviet involvement, the papers have tended to err on the side of caution, i.e. they have frequently (and correctly) stressed the USSR's anxiety

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to avoid uncontrollable risks, but they sometimes have exaggerated the degree of risk the Soviets actually perceived, or were likely to perceive, in particular situations.

7. Be that as it may, we have examined the estimative record with some care, finding that relevant judgments have been made in ten or so NIEs (and SNIEs) published since 1964. The thrust of these papers is described below, and quotations from a number of the major ones are included as appropriate.\*

8. A special estimate published in the fall of 1965 dealt at some length with the Soviet position in the Middle East.\*\* This paper, which attempted to respond to the particular concern felt in some quarters about the impact of communist ideology and subversion, judged that none of the states of the area was likely to come under communist control. The paper emphasized, however, that "the Soviets are working to bring nationalist regimes progressively into such close association with Moscow that a reversal of the trend becomes

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\* A number of NIEs dealing primarily with the Middle East itself or with Soviet military affairs make judgments consonant with those quoted below but are not specifically cited in this discussion.

\*\* SNIE 10-2-65, "Soviet and Chinese Communist Strategy and Tactics in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia," 15 July 1965, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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virtually impossible." It further noted that "in terms of state-to-state relationships and international affairs, Soviet prestige is [particularly] high in Cairo," and that the Soviets probably regard "their efforts to extend their presence and influence in the Arab world over the past ten years as having been fairly successful." Finally, in what may now appear to be something of an understatement, the paper concluded that, "All things considered, we do not anticipate any decline in the overall Soviet presence, which has become an established element in the affairs of the region."

9. An important paper specifically concerning the Soviet role in "the Mediterranean Basin" appeared on 1 June 1967, just a week before the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war.\* NIEs did not predict that war. (Neither did the Russians; in fact, as we said in a later estimate, they seemed to be "surprised and dismayed by the outbreak of the war and shocked by the speed and extent of the Arab defeat.") But most of the general judgments of this paper have passed the test of time. For example:

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\* NIE 11-6-67, "Soviet Strategy and Intentions in the Mediterranean Basin," 1 June 1967, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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[The USSR] is now widely accepted by radically disposed political leaders as a responsible ally in the vaguely defined "anti-imperialist" cause. Over the same period, the US has tended more and more to become identified as an opponent of this cause... Thus the Soviets... have largely succeeded in making the process of transition to postcolonial development in this area an aspect of the broader East-West power contest. It is this fact which will greatly influence the kind of threats to Western interests which seem certain to develop in the years ahead.

Obviously if the West suffers serious reverses to its interests or areas are denied to it, there will be little comfort in saying that this was owing to Communist-influenced rather than Communist-controlled nationalist forces. Nevertheless, the distinction between control and influence is vitally important to the Soviets themselves, and will set certain limits to the kind of actions and the extent of the risks they will undertake in pursuing their aims. It will mean in particular that Moscow will be prudent about backing clients who may in its view be inclined to adventurism in employing violence against local opponents or the Western powers... Even within its present limitations, however, Soviet policy is likely to find numerous opportunities in the Mediterranean and its adjacent areas in the years ahead.

The Soviets may be thinking of their possible involvement in limited conflicts in the region. In principle the policy of attempting to displace Western influence could present such contingencies. Or local conflicts might occur in which the Soviets would wish to support their clients at some fairly high level of risk short of actual intervention. Their activities may point to an intention someday to operate in the Mediterranean in this way.

10. Specifically concerning the Arab-Israeli confrontation, this same estimate made the following principal point

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(the accuracy of which was to be confirmed during the June War):

Moscow has clearly decided that it has more to gain by taking sides (in the Arab-Israeli dispute), probably because it sees the Arabs, in consequence of their numbers and revolutionary nationalism, as the best long-term bet. If the Arabs were to make gains in their struggle against Israel, and the Soviets had supported them, the USSR's influence would obviously make a substantial advance throughout the Arab world. Nor do the Soviets have any basic objection to an Arab resort to violence against Israel, but we do not believe that they would themselves lend direct military support to the Arabs, and they would not run high risks of an East-West conflict for the sake of the Arab cause.

11. What was not foreseen in this estimate was that Arab gains against Israel were not the only precondition for the expansion of Soviet influence. On the contrary, Arab losses in the June War led subsequently to a significant increase in Soviet influence. The first post-war estimate appeared in July 1967 and this paper did take account of this eventuality:

Nasser and the Syrian leaders are probably now more dependent on Soviet support and more susceptible to Soviet influence than before the war. While we do not believe that the radical Arab states wish to become members of the Communist camp, they may accept a closer relationship with the USSR.\*

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\* SNIE 11-13-67, "Probable Soviet Objectives in Rearming Arab States," 20 July 1967, TOP SECRET, Controlled Dissem



12. The same paper made a number of other interesting  
(and accurate) judgments:

To demonstrate Soviet support of the Arabs against Israel and the US, Moscow has already expanded its presence in the area. There is likely to be a further influx of Soviet advisers, instructors, and technicians. And, though the USSR will continue to be wary of formal base agreements, and will almost certainly avoid signing any defense pacts, there is likely to be an increased Soviet military presence in Arab ports and military facilities.

Concerning a question current in 1970, the paper stated that Moscow "will wish to confine its material and political support of the Arabs to a scope and nature that will avoid severe risk of provocative Arab action or of Israeli pre-emption." (Perhaps, in view of recent developments, the word to underscore here is wish.)

13. A special estimate, "Soviet Interests and Activities in Arab States" appeared in January 1968, some six months after the war.\* Three of its principal conclusions were as follows:

The main Soviet objective in the Middle East remains essentially the same as before the June War -- to win for the USSR a position as dominant foreign

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\* SNIE 11-9-68, 18 January 1968, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

power in the area. The Soviets face both new problems and new opportunities. Nonetheless the radical Arabs are now more dependent on the USSR, and the Soviets probably judge that the new opportunities will compensate for such losses as they suffered as a result of the Arab defeat. (Conclusion A)

.../The Soviets/ will probably continue to use their forces in the Middle East for essentially political purposes -- to influence events and to improve their position in the region. Nonetheless, resumption of Arab-Israeli hostilities would produce a dangerous and essentially unpredictable situation, in which the risks of Soviet involvement, by accident or miscalculation, might be greater than before. (Conclusion B)

The Soviets will probably continue to give strong, though not unlimited, backing to Nasser, whom they continue to regard as their chief Arab ally. Despite some mutual irritants, and despite Nasser's desire to maintain independence, Soviet and UAR policies on important issues are congruent -- notably, opposition to US influence in the area, a cautious policy toward Israel, and at least short-term accommodation between Arab radicals and moderates. (Conclusion C)

14. This same paper dealt fairly extensively with the question of Soviet military power in the area. Specifically, concerning the possibility of Soviet bases in Arab countries, it reiterated longstanding judgments that the Soviets did not wish to establish conventional installations of their own. "They probably do not wish to risk involving themselves in this way in future crises of peripheral consequence to Soviet interests and beyond the ability of Moscow to control." But this paper added some new qualifications:

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We think the Soviets will see their interests better served by helping the Arabs develop ports and air bases which can be used by the Soviets, probably on a limited basis, and which might even be run in part by Soviet advisory personnel. Under certain circumstances, the distinction between a Soviet base and an Arab one could, as a practical matter, become meaningless... However, we think that the distinction will probably continue to have some real meaning for the foreseeable future.

15. This estimate also discussed some broader Soviet military considerations:

Beyond the question of bases in the Middle East lies the broader question of the USSR's attitude toward the application of its conventional military power in areas beyond its periphery, and the development of capabilities -- e.g., air and sealift -- appropriate to this... By the early 1970s, the capabilities of Soviet airborne and amphibious assault forces will be substantially improved, partly through the acquisition of new heavy air transports and naval landing ships. Such forces will still be primarily designed to support operations on the Soviet periphery, but they will also make it easier for Moscow to support Arab clients.

16. Also from this January 1968 paper, a new note particularly appropriate to current circumstances:

The Soviets will probably continue efforts to make the Mediterranean a less favorable environment for US naval forces by maintaining a high level of deployed combatants... They may, in addition, be increasingly inclined to deploy their ships specifically in support of client states during periods of regional tension... [And] as suggested by the addition of landing ships to their Mediterranean squadron and by the temporary use

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of Soviet personnel in combat in Yemen, they may in certain circumstances be willing to provide a more direct sort of help to clients, at least so long as the military risks of so doing do not seem high and the political risks of inaction seem quite large.

Finally, a judgment concerning Moscow and Cairo:

The UAR, and President Nasser in particular, seem still to hold a high place in the Soviets' calculation of their opportunities in the Middle East. The rapid Soviet resupply of arms and the extension of emergency economic assistance in the immediate aftermath of the crisis were good measures of the importance Moscow attached to Nasser's continued survival, and these measures probably helped him preserve his position... The Soviets have made a heavy investment in him over the years and we doubt that they see any good alternative on the horizon.

17. A general paper which, among other things, examined Soviet foreign policies worldwide was published in February 1969.\* Its main conclusion concerning the Soviets and the Middle East suggested the basic nature of the Soviet problem -- "to keep the risks under control" but at the same time "to avoid diminishing the influence [the Soviets] have won with the Arab States" -- and then raised the contingency of another round of active warfare. Concerning the latter, it stated:

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\* NIE 11-69, "Basic Factors and Main Tendencies in Current Soviet Policy," 27 February 1969, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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Should renewed hostilities occur, the USSR might be drawn into assisting the defense of the Arabs, but it would not want to run the political and military risks of joining in attacks on Israel or actually threatening its survival. At that stage, the Soviets would probably collaborate tacitly with the US to control the situation.

18. In the early part of 1970 we prepared a paper which superseded the broad range and ambitious effort of June 1967.\* Like its predecessor, this estimate sought to cover almost the entire (Mediterranean) waterfront; its contents included a section on the general strategic setting as seen in Moscow, an examination of "Instruments of Soviet Power in the Area," discussions of Soviet policies in the Middle East and in the Western Mediterranean, a four-part look at Soviet intentions and capabilities in certain contingencies, and finally, a brief survey of "Long Term Prospects." The following paragraph, lifted from the text in its entirety, helped to set the tone for the paper as a whole:

Inevitably, as the degree of its involvement in the area has grown and the level of its commitment risen, the USSR has found itself faced with mounting costs and risks. It has exhibited some anxiety to control these risks and to curb the excessive enthusiasms of some of its clients. But it has also chosen to live with danger, and its position is now potentially vulnerable to the

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\* NIE 11-6-70, "Soviet Policies in the Middle East and Mediterranean Area." 5 March 1970, SECRET, Controlled Dissem

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pressures and perils of events over which it may have little or no control -- the actions of the Arab states, of Israel, and even of the US. Broadly speaking, Moscow has behaved as if it wishes the Middle East to remain an area of at least some tension. It apparently believes that the risks attending this are manageable, and that the continued polarization in the area will make it increasingly difficult for the conservative Arab states to maintain their ties with the US, thus decreasing US influence throughout the area. But the Soviets clearly recognize that in the event of another explosion in the Middle East they would be faced with some very hard choices.

19. This comprehensive paper was written and published (on 5 March) before it was known that the USSR had deployed Soviet-manned weapons systems to the UAR. It did conclude, however, that -- though the Soviets are "clearly aware that greater direct involvement [on the side of the UAR] entails heightened risks" -- they would probably decide, "if they had not already done so, that some sort of favorable response to Egyptian requests [for more advanced types of military equipment] is necessary unless Israeli attacks near Cairo are soon stopped."

Certainly Moscow does not like to see Cairo helpless in the face of Israeli air assaults. Certainly it does not wish this sort of circumstances to weaken Nasser's position and jeopardize domestic stability in the UAR. And certainly it would be fearful that a refusal to aid the UAR in its hour of need would threaten to disrupt relations with Egypt and damage Soviet prestige throughout the Arab world.

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20. Further, specifically concerning the kind of aid the Soviets might be expected to provide in the UAR's hour of need, the estimate offered the following:

The principal Egyptian problem is the lack of certain more advanced weapons system and above all of qualified personnel to operate an integrated air defense system effectively. Hence any significant improvement in Egyptian defenses, at least in the short run, would almost certainly require Soviet personnel to man the network.

Additional Soviet support for Egypt's air defense could be at various levels. An integrated defense designed to protect the Cairo area might involve providing advanced interceptors, several battalions of advanced SA missiles, and additional antiaircraft artillery (AAA). Major elements of such a system would have to be directed, operated, and maintained by Soviet personnel, including pilots, for a considerable period, perhaps indefinitely...

If the Soviets felt that they had to provide protection for the bulk of Egypt's population, industry, and military installations, they would have to turn to more sophisticated equipment and establish air defense coverage of the lower Nile valley and the Suez Canal area. Such a system would require expanded early warning ground control intercept (EW/GCI) radars, many more advanced interceptors, greater numbers of improved SA missiles and additional AAA for key point defenses. To make the system operational within a few months would require the introduction of entire Soviet units involving many thousands of men.

The foregoing discussion of possible Soviet levels of support for Egyptian air defense is only illustrative: a number of variations are conceivable. The Soviets would of course strongly prefer to keep their support at the lowest possible levels of risk and cost. In deciding

what levels of support would prove sufficient to their objectives, their risk/advantage calculus would have to weigh possible Israeli responses as well as Nasser's requirements. In view of the stake the Soviets have in Nasser's survival, and in the preservation of their relations with the radical Arabs, the Soviets may feel obliged to enlarge their risks.

21. SNIE 30-70, "The USSR and the Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation," 14 May 1970 (TOP SECRET, ALL SOURCE) is the most recent estimate dealing with the Soviets and the Middle East. It was published after the construction of Soviet-manned SA-3 sites in the Nile Valley but before SA-3 missiles were emplaced between the Nile and the Suez Canal. Following are a number of its key judgments specifically concerning the Soviets ( a large part of the paper discusses the Egyptians and the Israelis):

The Soviets have left their precise military intentions [in the area] ambiguous. Thus, no direct evidence can be adduced in support of a judgment about the limits of their probable action. We believe, however, that the circumstances in which the Soviet decision developed and the USSR's customary cautious approach to situations of enlarged risk argue that the USSR's present intention is to confine use of its forces in Egypt to a limited defensive role...

By curbing Israeli incursions -- as they have so far succeeded in doing -- [the Soviets can] reassert their credibility as protectors of the Egyptians. They could expect, at the same time, to stiffen Egyptian morale, to shore up Egypt's military position vis-a-vis Israel, to leave the latter uncertain about Soviet



intentions, and to strengthen the Soviet-Egyptian bargaining position in diplomatic discussions. They might have foreseen, also, that, by taking actions which could be represented as the rendering of defensive assistance to a friend under aggressive attack, they would make it difficult for the US to find an effective riposte.

It is possible that the Soviets will eventually expand their air defense eastward toward the Canal, perhaps doing so by gradual and carefully controlled stages during which they could test the reactions of Israel and the US to such developments. Yet, there are sound and obvious reasons for them to confine their forces to assisting in the air defense of the principal cities and military installations in the Nile Valley. If Israeli aircraft resume attacks on these targets they will probably be engaged by Soviet aircraft, though the Soviets are unlikely to publicly acknowledge such action. If the Israelis undertake heavy and sustained air and ground attacks on Egyptian forces in the Canal area, we think that the Soviets would be reluctant to commit their own air forces this far forward, but the pressure of events might require them to involve themselves further and faster than they probably intend at the present time.

...There is ample evidence... that the Russians recognize that the Egyptian Armed Forces do not have, and will not soon have, the capability to carry the war to the Israelis in Sinai on a significant scale. And only if the Russians were willing to support Egypt in such a venture -- and we do not believe that they are -- would they see an urgent need to assist Egypt in securing control of the air over the Canal. Success in such an undertaking, even if it were to be contemplated, would require a highly visible commitment of Soviet pilots. The effort would clearly threaten to alter the Egyptian-Israeli military equation in favor of the Arabs; Israel's strategy for dealing with the "war of attrition" would become untenable. The Russians almost certainly believe that they would in this way come into direct military conflict with

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Israel and thereby risk confrontation with the US.  
[But] the Russians evidently see no very great danger of direct military conflict with the US arising out of the actions they have taken thus far, nor even any substantial damage to the overall climate of Soviet-American relations...

...It is possible that the steps the Russians have taken to buttress the Egyptian's military position have given both a greater sense of confidence and might even enable them to be more flexible in negotiations. It is more to be expected that the Soviet-Egyptian bargaining position will reflect the expectation that the Israelis, under US pressures, must now be more forthcoming with respect to withdrawals and negotiations.

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